

St. Thomas of Canterbury:  
The Image of a Martyr

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Thomas, dead on the alter through no fault of his own, going against the advice of his priests to bolt the door during vespers, and meeting his end steadfast in his convictions on account of a King that recklessly asked his nobles “Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?” Such an image made popular by biographers shortly after the event and unto the stage and in cinema in modern times have perpetuated the myth of the martyred archbishop as a champion of the Church over the secular world. Few people dared to ask if Thomas really welcomed death on account of his Church or possibly for more personal reasons. Perhaps Thomas welcomed the blade in the hope of eternal fame, or perhaps he even welcomed it as a protest or revenge on King Henry II. An examination of the life of the Saint might shed some light on Thomas’ motives for his martyrdom and could reveal that he put himself up for death for his vanity rather than the Church’s sanctity.

Born into the London merchant class on St. Thomas the Apostle’s day in 1120, the young Thomas Becket did not have it as bad as most children in the city.<sup>1</sup> He was able to attend school from the age of 10 to 21 at an Augustinian priory in Surrey and also studied at Paris among the great young minds of the day.<sup>2</sup> It is tempting to draw comparisons with other sinners turned saints but it seems safe to say that Becket’s early life was nothing like that of St. Augustine of Hippo’s in the way of debauchery and he is reported to be relatively well-behaved and moderately bright as a young man. After the death of his mother, Thomas found a patron in Osbert Huitdeniers, a banker and after a couple years in the house of Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>3</sup> Owing much of his early success to the connections of his father Gilbert with the Archbishop, Thomas was made Archdeacon of Canterbury in 1154.<sup>4</sup> Thomas is said to have made £300 a year from this post and in Lincoln was rumored to have “taken money from sinners in commutation of penance.”<sup>5</sup> Though accepting gifts and money as penance were not new practices by clerics at the time, Thomas’ early career seemed to have the same goal as his merchant father’s rather than saving souls; profits and title were of greater concern.

With the ascension of Henry II, the Archdeacon Thomas added the title Royal Chancellor to his person. Barlow argues that this position was not terribly important at the time when Thomas took it but that the friendship that developed between king and servant gave rise to the office.<sup>6</sup> Herbert of Bosham, one of Thomas’ clerks spoke of the king and Thomas’ friendship “...our Thomas far outshone all others at the king’s court in renown and in the king’s favor...”<sup>7</sup> While the biographer William fitz Stephen, writing after the martyrdom, describes Thomas as wearing a hair shirt, bearing his naked flesh to lashings, and giving charity to the poor and generally having a burdened conscience performing his duties at Chancellor, there are other accounts that suggest that Thomas was given to every whim of the King at this time like “field

<sup>1</sup> The year of his birth is in dispute, 1118 is also used. “Becket” was the spelling of his name at birth. Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>3</sup> 26-28.

<sup>4</sup> William fitzStephen, “From *On Thomas Becket as Chancellor and Archbishop*,” in *English Historical Documents*, vol. 2. ed. David C. Douglas and George W. Greenway, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), 704.

<sup>5</sup> Barlow, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert of Bosham, “From *On the Appointment of Thomas Becket as Archbishop*” in *English Historical Documents*, 708.

sports” and other worldly pursuits.<sup>8</sup> It appears that there was a real friendship between the two men and that as Chancellor; Thomas was at the king’s disposal. Despite the signs and stories of his contrition at this stage in his career, again we see that Thomas remains the servant of the king and not yet a rival.

Change came after the death of Theobald in 1161. Henry, looking to fill the vacancy with someone he could trust to be a willing partner in the Church put forward Thomas as his candidate. The Chancellor then also became Archbishop of Canterbury by a near unanimous election with Gilbert Foliot, Bishop of London and Thomas’ rival being the only dissenting voice according to Latin biographer Roger of Pontigny.<sup>9</sup> There is some dispute as to whether his appointment to the highest ecclesiastic office in the realm was a turning point in the spiritual life of Thomas Becket or if this non-secular office gave Thomas the opportunity to seek his own ends while still professing loyalty to Henry II. The Latin biographers again, writing after the martyrdom, write that he did cease his less than holy activities that made him so close with Henry when he took the office and renewed his piety through penance. On the other hand, the modern historians like Frank Barlow and Edwin Abbott are more skeptical. In regards to the archbishop’s fame among the poor, Abbott writes “Thomas himself did not put forth the poor, but ‘his order,’ or ‘the liberties of the Church,’ as the good cause for which he was ready to die.”<sup>10</sup> John Gillingham describes how Thomas’ appointment changed the relationship with his king like this: “He [Thomas] set out to prove, to an astonished world, that he was the best of all the possible archbishops. Right from the start, he went out of his way to oppose the king who, chiefly out of friendship, had promoted him.”<sup>11</sup>

The first way he opposed the king was by resigning his office of Chancellor and thus offending the king who intended him to hold both offices. This offence would be the first of many, chief among them are recorded by Edward Grim, who would later write an eyewitness narrative of the martyrdom, and Roger of Ponigny. First, a dispute about the payment of “Sheriff’s aid” at the council of Woodstock and secondly the matter of Jurisdiction over “criminous clerks” put Thomas and Henry at odds with each other. Grim describes the matter at Woodstock like this:

Two shillings from each hide were given to the king’s officials who, in the capacity of sheriffs, guarded the shires. This sum the king wished to have enrolled in the treasury and added to his own revenue; whom the archbishop resisted to his face, saying that it ought not to be exacted as revenue. ‘Nor will we’, said he, ‘give it as revenue, my lord king, saving your pleasure. But if the sheriffs and officials or servants of the shires shall provide us with good service and maintain our vassals by their arms, we will by no means be remiss in contributing to their aid.’ The king, however, took the archbishop’s answer amiss and said, ‘By the eyes of God, it shall be given as revenue... nor is it seemly for you to gainsay me, when no one would vex your men against your will.’ The

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<sup>8</sup> Barlow, 43, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Roger of Ponigny, “From *On the Election of Thomas Becket as Archbishop*,” in *English Historical Documents*, 710.

<sup>10</sup> Edwin A. Abbott, *St. Thomas of Canterbury: His Death and Miracles*, vol. 1 (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1898), 3.

<sup>11</sup> John Gillingham, “From *The Early Middle Ages*,” in *The Oxford History of Britain*, ed. Kenneth O. Morgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 144.

archbishop... replied, 'By the reverence of those eyes by which you have sworn, my lord king, not a penny shall be given from all my land or from the jurisdiction of the Church.' The king was silent...<sup>12</sup>

Clearly the king seems to have terribly misjudged Thomas when he appointed him to this position because when Thomas was part of his secular retinue he was eager to please his sovereign but now as a cleric, Henry's prerogative was no longer paramount. As if this disagreement was not enough, larger implications were to be found in the jurisdiction matter. This episode was sparked by the case of Philip 'de Brois' in which Philip, a clerk of the Church was accused of murdering a knight, was acquitted by the Church court, accused again by a sheriff of the king for the same murder, an accusation that the king supported, then was put under the protection of the Church by the archbishop Thomas.<sup>13</sup> The result was that Philip was made to answer for the charge of insulting the sheriff but the archbishop's protection saved him from the retrial of the murder case. This incident became an open wound to the king because Thomas had been able to save this clerk from death. As a result of this wound, in fall of the same year 1163, the council of Westminster was convened by Henry to give a definitive answer to Thomas and the Church as to where their jurisdiction lay. Clerks that committed "great crimes" would be stripped of their orders and tried in the civil court where they could receive corporal punishment in addition to the spiritual punishment they would receive by losing their office.<sup>14</sup> The king's words accomplished very little though as Thomas had the support of the bishops and the issue was allowed to fester. Barlow tells us that as an insult to Thomas, Prince Henry was taken from the archbishop's home where he had been staying as was custom among nobles, and "With Thomas hurt and defiant and Henry embittered and revengeful, an honourable solution was out of the question."<sup>15</sup> It appears that for the archbishop defiance and the repair of his pride became reasons for fighting toward Church rights in the prosecution of clergy at this point. Defiance, pride, and envy might be characteristics expected of kings but are they qualities that make an archbishop into a *cause célèbre* and eventual saint?

In a letter to Roger of Worcester Thomas explains his views on the differences between the heavenly and earthly realms like this:

"What agreement is there between Christ and the devil? What understanding between God's temple and idols? What partnership between faith and injustice? But you fear the king; truly, God ought to have been feared more. Poverty and the pains of proscription are terrible; but Christ recognizes as confessors those who suffer persecution for justice' sake, and declares them blessed, not those who wear saffron robes..."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Edward Grim, "From *The Council of Woodstock (July 1163), and the case of Philip 'de Brois'*" in *English Historical Documents*, 713-14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 714.

<sup>14</sup> Herbert of Bosham, "From *The Council of Westminster*," in *English Historical Documents*, 715.

<sup>15</sup> Barlow, 95-96.

<sup>16</sup> Archbishop Thomas of Canterbury to Bishop Roger of Worcester, 1169, in *The Correspondence of Thomas Becket Archbishop of Canterbury 1162-1170*, vol. 2, ed. & trans. Anne J. Duggan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 883.

This passage and others like it found in his letters go far to justify his cause to the faithful. Such ideas did not stop Thomas from initially succumbing to pressures, including threats encouraging him to accept the Constitutions of Clarendon in January of 1164.<sup>17</sup> The Constitutions made up of 16 articles, among other things, re-asserted the king's court as having jurisdiction over clerks and layman (Articles 1&3), forbade clergy from leaving the kingdom without the king's permission (Article 4), stressed that the offices of the clergy were thought of as "baronies" and appointment to these offices was at his discretion (articles 11&12), and made excommunication in his realm only possible with the approval of the king or his agents (article 10).<sup>18</sup> Thomas had already challenged some of these "ancestral customs," and after being encouraged to ask the pope for approval of the articles by the king went back on his earlier agreement to them and even obstructed the execution of article 3 by forbidding the turning over of clergy to secular courts "on pain of excommunication."<sup>19</sup> Thomas also transgressed upon article 4 in November of 1164 when, fearing for his safety and hoping to find ecclesiastical support from Pope Alexander III and secular support from the King of France Louis VII, he went into exile after his conviction of ignoring a summons to a suit against him in the royal court. This absence was punished by the loss of all his "movables" at the council of Northampton and accusations by his enemies of simony, and treason.<sup>20</sup> Thomas' exile in France from 1164-1170 becomes a period in the saint's life of positioning himself among rival Kings Henry and Louis, and a schism threatened Pope Alexander III for the primacy of the Church in ecclesiastical matters in his native land. For the leaders mentioned, Thomas became a political pawn whose usefulness would wax and wane in the changing political climate of the time.<sup>21</sup> Once more, Thomas would play the roll of the persecuted defender of the Church in order to feed his vainglory.

Thomas' exile in France was a huge blow to Henry's ego but at the outset did little to draw outside support to the archbishop's cause. Pope Alexander was in no position to act on Thomas' behalf by admonishing Henry because the pope risked England recognizing the anti-pope Paschal III.<sup>22</sup> Thomas was thus forced to wait for the political climate to change before he could attack the king and his "ancient customs." His opportunity to vent his complaints upon Henry would come in the spring of 1166 when the pope became angry with Henry for "contacts with the emperor."<sup>23</sup> Thomas again asserted his claim for primacy, and now armed with a papal legation he wrote to the king in May of 1166:

For the Church of God consists of two orders, clergy and people. Among the clergy are apostles, apostolic men, bishops and other doctors of the Church, to whom is committed the care and governance of the Church, who have to treat and perform ecclesiastical business, that the whole may redound to the saving of souls. Wherefore to St. Peter it was said... and not to kings or princes, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.'...And since it is certain that kings receive their power from the Church, not the latter hers from them but from Christ, so, if I may speak with your pardon, you have not the power to give orders to

<sup>17</sup> Herbert of Bosham, "From *On the Constitutions of Clarendon*," in *English Historical Documents*, 722.

<sup>18</sup> "From *The Constitutions of Clarendon*" in *English Historical Documents*, 718-721.

<sup>19</sup> Barlow, 104-106.

<sup>20</sup> William fitzStephen "From *The Council of Northampton*," in *English Historical Documents*, 733.

<sup>21</sup> Barlow, 134.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>23</sup> The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa supported the Anti-pope and was responsible for repeated military intrigues in Italy at the expense of the Papal lands and her Italian allies. Ibid., 143.

bishops,...absolve or excommunicate anyone, nor to drag clerks before secular tribunals, [etc.] ...and many other things of this kind which are written among those customs of yours which you call ancient...<sup>24</sup>

Thomas followed this letter by claiming from Vézelay in France, the Constitutions of Clarendon anathema and excommunicating several of the king's followers for among other things "communication with the schismatic archbishop of Cologne."<sup>25</sup> By making his position clear to the king Thomas almost guaranteed his martyrdom if ever bodily harm came to him from this point forward. As political currents shifted during his exile it became expedient for Alexander to seek reconciliation between the archbishop and Henry, but Henry would be the one asked to bend, not Thomas.<sup>26</sup> The pope's favor for Thomas was further secured when in 1170 the rights of the church of Canterbury were appropriated by the Archbishop of York in the coronation of the young King Henry, a clear affront to both Thomas and the pope.<sup>27</sup> Under the threat of having his continental possessions put under interdict, Henry conceded to Thomas and the pope's demands on 22 July 1170 at Fréteval. This "reconciliation" allowed the archbishop to return to England and reacquire his possessions from before his exile and recognized the archbishop and Church's rights in England.<sup>28</sup> Thomas had triumphed in principle but was under no illusions that his return to England would be a safe and happy one. Besides the king, Thomas had made many enemies among the secular and ecclesiastic community in England. Even his friends and supporters realized that Thomas would not last long in England and that the issues that drove Thomas into exile were far from settled. Herbert of Bosham writes that one of his followers addressed the archbishop before his return to England: "This day the peace of the Church has been discussed in the chapel of the Martyrdom, and it is my belief that only through your martyrdom will the Church ever obtain peace." Again indulging in pride Thomas replied, "Would to God she might be delivered, even by my blood!"<sup>29</sup>

Thomas fulfilled his prophesy less than a month after his return to England on 29 December 1170 by continuing practices that insulted the king like excommunicating his servants. His martyrdom, thanks to his biographers, put him on the fast track to sainthood and made his shrine one of the most famous in Europe. Immediately the peasants sympathetic to Thomas and those that saw him as the defender of the primacy of the Church reported miracles by mentioning him in their prayers or coming in contact with articles he touched. It is not in doubt that Thomas believed in his cause and was to a degree an ascetic and penitent, but what puts Thomas' motives in doubt is that he fought for the rights of his office and its privileges, not the poor, not for the salvation of his flock, or other spiritual matters that a man in his office might be expected to do. To be fair though, the abuse of Church offices for personal gain whether that gain is in pride, money, or power, was not uncommon in the Church at any time in history, even after Vatican II.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Becket to Henry II, 1166 in *English Historical Documents*, 743.

<sup>25</sup> The author of this letter, John of Salisbury, claims that Thomas avoided excommunicating the king himself because of an illness that had stricken Henry at the time. John of Salisbury to Bartholomew, bishop of Exeter, 1166, in *English Historical Documents*, 744.

<sup>26</sup> Barlow points to alliances made by the pope with the Byzantine Emperor and the improved position of Sicily against the Holy Roman Emperor as giving Alexander firmer ground on which to oppose Henry by 1170. Barlow, 198-99.

<sup>27</sup> William fitzStephen, "From *Account of the Coronation of the Young King Henry*," in *English Historical Documents*, 753-54.

<sup>28</sup> Herbert of Bosham, "From *The Reconciliation between Henry II and Thomas Becket*," in *Ibid.* 755.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert of Bosham, "From *The Conference at Montamarte*," in *Ibid.* 752.

In the end, the fact that Thomas became a champion for the poor after his martyrdom seems to be out of place in the wake of the circumstance as his cause which was fought on behalf of one form of power of wealth against another was hardly in the interest of the poor.

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